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AUTHOR Miller, Lewis H., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

The persona Robert Frost communicated to most of his wide, diverse, and often non-academic audience was that of a rather isolated New England farmer, who--because of his limited experience with city folk and urban living--was untouched and thereby uncorrupted by the ways of the world. In teaching Frost, as in teaching any poet, some sort of biographical background should be provided for students as a context through which the poet and his poetry are demystified. A judicious use of biographical detail can help to bring the poet and his poetry into a reader-friendly relationship with the students. Biography can often be used effectively in the service of overcoming the innate resistance students often express toward the reading and study of poetry. These facts about a poet can be invoked to guide students to a more open, informed, enjoyable, and natural response to the poetry. (A brief chronology, a supplementary chronology and a copy of the poem "Storm Fear" are included.) (MG)

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Lewis H. Miller, Jr.
English Department
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47405

ROBERT FROST AND THE USES OF BIOGRAPHY

I. Background

A major recent event in Frost studies was the publication of Lawrance Thompson's three-volume biography of Frost, 1966-1976. Prior to this biography (although others had been written) precious little was known by the public about Robert Frost's private life.

The image most of us carry with us of Frost is rather one-dimensional, but it is an image which he himself cultivated in his numerous public appearances and readings of his poetry, within academic settings and on the less cloistered lecture circuit--not to mention his last great performance at JFK's inauguration. The persona Frost communicated to most of his wide, diverse, and often non-academic audience was that of a rather isolated New England farmer, short on words, but long on wit and wisdom, who due to his limited experience with city folk and urban and urbane living was untouched and thereby uncorrupted by the ways of the world.

How could one who spent his time on a farm cultivating his vegetable garden or raising chickens (activities at which Frost

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failed utterly) and writing nature poetry, how could such a persona, with his white-tousled hair and his benign though deeply weathered countenance, be anything other than kindly, accessible, and generous, if not downright virtuous, patriotic, and God-fearing?

Of course I oversimplify the image which Frost projected at his public performances. But I do so with the conviction that most of Frost's audience wanted to believe in the type of persona I have just described, and that Frost gave his doting listeners a large enough dose of crackerbarrel hokum and wide-eyed innocence to fool them into thinking what they wanted to think: namely, here was a poet who was easy to read, here was a person who was easy to read. For example, when asked the inevitable question about "death" in the final lines of "Stopping By Woods," Frost consistently responded (at least in the dozen or so times I heard him) with some such ambiguity as "If there's death there, I'd have put it in the poem"--an answer which comforts those literalists of the imagination who do not realize, or do not want to realize, that Frost's response begs the question completely.

Or then there is the nasty Frost responding to an earnest Amherst College student who in front of a large gathering asked: "Mr. Frost, sir, have you even been confused?" (The student had in mind the concluding lines to "Directive," "Drink and be whole beyond confusion," or Frost's essay "The Figure a Poem Makes," "a momentary stay against confusion"). Frost's response was less

than kind: "Do you know how to play the game CONFUSION?" "No," said the unsuspecting student. "Let me teach you; you start by asking me if I'm confused . . ." "Are you confused Mr. Frost, sir?" "NO. Now I ask you are you confused?" "Yes," responded the thorougly perplexed student. "I win," concluded Frost. Or then there are the bawdy poems Frost used to recite: "Mary had a littlelamb/Its name was Jesus Christ/God, the father was the ram,/But Joseph took it nice." I mention these examples of play, sacrilegiousness, and rather cruel one-upsmanship to illustrate the often ignored complexity of Frost the public figure.

The furor which Thompson's biography sparked (specifically volume two, The Years of Triumph, 1970) arose in large part, I think, from a clash of images. Frost the self-effacing, likable, and rather innocent grandfather vs. Frost the callous opportunist who viewed most contemporary poets as distinct threats to his own fame and worthy of his most vicious scorn and contempt. What's more, as Thompson's biography makes clear, at times, Frost could even direct his rapier at his own family.

As many of you know, the biographical flap about Frost was preceded in 1959 by the flap which arose when the critic Lionel Trilling in a tribute to Frost on his 85th birthday called him a tragic poet who wrote terrifying poetry. The genteel press (e.g. the NY Times) could not accept so bleak a vision, and its reviewers did their best to discredit Trilling's position. Similarly when Thompson's second volume appeared in 1970, even so

astute a critic of poetry as Helen Vendler was quick to label Frost a "monster." Other judgements varied from "mean-spirited megalomaniac" to "a more hateful human being cannot have lived."

These pronouncements having been made on the basis of materials in Thompson's second and third (co-authored) volumes, the Frost publishing mill continued to grind out letters and journals which lent very little credence to such harsh judgments. I refer to Lesley Frost's diary, New Hampshire's Child, and to the publication of the Family Letters of Robert Frost. More recently, (1984) one of Frost most appreciate, sensitive, and toughminded critics, William Pritchard, published a literary biography, Robert Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered, which is, among other things, a corrective to Thompson's work, and which argues, rightly I believe, that Thompson lacked the literary acumen and the ear for irony and play necessary for presenting a balanced assessment of the poet's life, his letters, his conversation, and his poetry. Pritchard is especially good at demonstrating the inappropriateness of labeling Frost, of setting him, his life or works, into categories as Thompson has done--e.g. Fear, Gossip, Hate, Jealousy, Revenge, Self-Centeredness, to name a few of the negative pigeonholes by which Thompson attempts to hold on to one of the most slippery public personalities of our time.

In 1986, Prof. Donald Sheehy (in American Literature, vol. 58, no. 3, 393-409) by examining the notes and journals of

Lawrance Thompson (only recently made available to the public at the University of Virginia Library), demonstrates Thompson's preoccupation with the psychologist Karen Horney's book, Neurosis and Human Growth. Sheehy concludes that Thompson was, in his biography, responding to Frost's own animus against Thompson (their friendship had been a stormy and vexed one) by applying Horney's terms to Frost: that, in short, a demonstration of the "neurotic Frost" became the unspoken principle governing Thompson's biography. Thus, according to Sheehy's reading of Thompson's copious notes and journals which span 25 years, Thompson went to excessive lengths to emphasize Frost's quest for glory and the vindictiveness which accompanied that quest--traits which could be explained, according to Thompson, by invoking Frost's father's harsh discipline and Frost's mother's overweening indulgence of her son.

II. Application

Now, what might all of this hugger-mugger information have to do with you and me as teachers of Frost's poetry? Very little, I think. As Bill Pritchard is quick to admit in chapter one of his literary biography, "to write a literary life of Frost is to enter the realm of guesswork." Or in the words of the poet himself: "A poem would be no good that hadn't doors. I wouldn't leave them open, though." As high-school and college teachers of

Frost, how should we approach the poet's private and professional life? There is obviously no easy answer to this question, and each of us will deal with the biographical issues and facts as we see fit. Yet I would suggest that in teaching Frost, as in teaching any poet, some sort of biographical background should be provided for our students--not as so much cultural baggage and not necessarily as a lens through which to read the poetry, but as a context through which the poet and his poetry is demystified.

Isn't it true that students (and sometimes teachers) tend to view poets as abstractions or presences rather than as human beings who lived and breathed, fell in love, married, bore childen, endured sickness and sadness in their own lives? A judicious use of biographical detail can help us to bring the poet and his or her poetry into a user-friendly, or reader-friendly relation with our students. My students frequently express an innate resistance to the reading and study of poetry, and I have found, as you may have too, that biography can often be used effectively in the service of overcoming this barrier.

That Robert and Elinor Frost remained married for over 40 years (until her death in 1938); that their courtship in the 1890s was fraught with tension and jealousy, and included Frost's rather callow suicide trek into the Dismal Swamp of Virginia; that Frost was once a young man who wrote young man's poetry, poetry often charged with passion and sexuality; that Frost was

born in San Francisco and considered himself (as did his New England neighbors) to be an outsider during his farming days and years at Derry Farm in New Hampshire; that some of his very best poetry reflects the insights of an interloper who is never quite at home in the area North of Boston; that Frost and Elinor lived in virtual isolation on a farm in N.H. for over ten years before he was ever recognized (at the age of forty) as a poet worth publishing and worth reading; that the Frosts'life was heavy with sorrowful events; that Frost categorically refused to read aloud (even in his old age) one of his most moving poems (and one of his greatest), because it was so closely related to the death of his son Elliott in 1900; that his early poetry reflects obliquely the drama of a man and a woman (and sometimes a child) interacting with one another romantically and at the same time confronting the chaotic forces of the natural environment which threaten the very heart and hearth of domestic stability--all of these facts and more can be invoked to guide our students to a more open, informed, enjoyable, and natural response to the poetry than might otherwise be the case.

I'd recommend volume one of the Thompson biography or the condensed version of the three, supplemented by Pritchard's chapter, "Elevated Play," in his Lives of the Modern Poets, Oxford University Press, 1980. Finally, the "supplementary chronology" which I have composed (following the attached public chronology--from Lathem and Thompson's Robert Frost: Poetry and

Prose [Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972]) should help students to understand Frost in human terms, as should the early poem "Storm Fear" (also attached) which exhibits the possible disintegration of a young family in the face of threatening and beckoning forces of the natural world. Indeed, a close reading of this poem can serve teachers and students well as a lesson in just how far we should or should not go in invoking Frost's private life as a means of understanding his poetry.

from
E. C. Latham
Lawrance Thompson
Robert Frost: Poetry & Prose

A Brief Chronology

1874 Robert Lee Frost is born at San Francisco, California, on the twenty-sixth of March.

1885 RF's mother, Isabelle Moodie Frost, upon the death of her husband, William Prescott Frost, Jr., travels with her son and daughter (Jeanie Florence Frost, born 1876) to Lawrence, Massachusetts, her husband's boyhood home; after a brief interval in Lawrence she moves with her two children to Salem, New Hampshire, to begin teaching in the town schools there.

1888 RF begins his high school course at Lawrence, commuting from Salem.

1890 RF's first poem, "La Noche Triste," is published in the Lawrence *High School Bulletin*.

1892 RF is graduated from Lawrence High School, sharing valedictory honors with Elinor Miriam White; is chosen Class Poet; enters Dartmouth College, remaining there less than a semester.

1893 Begins period devoted to teaching, mill work, newspaper reporting, and odd jobs.

1894 "My Butterfly," RF's first poem in a publication of national circulation, appears in *The Independent* (New York), November 8.

1895 Marries Elinor Miriam White in Lawrence, December 19.

1897 Enters Harvard College as a special student, formally withdrawing in March 1899.

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1900 Moves with his family to Derry, New Hampshire, to engage in chicken farming.

1906 Begins teaching at Pinkerton Academy in Derry.

1911 Resigns from Pinkerton Academy staff and then moves to Plymouth, New Hampshire, to join the faculty of the New Hampshire State Normal School there.

1912 Goes with his family to live in England.

1913 *A Boy's Will* is published in London by David Nutt and Company.

1914 *North of Boston* is published by Nutt.

1915 Returns to America; both *North of Boston* and *A Boy's Will* are published in New York by Henry Holt and Company, RF's principal publishers henceforth; purchases farm at Franconia, New Hampshire.

1916 *Mountain Interval* is published by Holt.

1917 Begins teaching at Amherst College.

1920 Resigns from Amherst College faculty; returns to Franconia, New Hampshire; then moves to South Shaftsbury, Vermont.

1921 Accepts appointment as Poet in Residence at University of Michigan.

1922 Is reappointed for a second year on University of Michigan staff, as Fellow in Creative Arts.

1923 The first of RF's several editions of *Selected Poems* is published; *New Hampshire* is published (Pulitzer Prize 1924); returns to a professorship at Amherst College.

1925 Leaves Amherst College to return to University of Michigan as Fellow in Letters.

1926 Resigns from University of Michigan and returns again to an Amherst College professorship.

1928 Goes abroad, visiting France, England, and Ireland; *West-Running Brook* is published.

1930 RF's first *Collected Poems* is published (Pulitzer Prize 1931).

1931 Receives Russell Loines Poetry Prize from National Institute of Arts and Letters.

1936 Serves as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University (while still on Amherst College faculty), delivering lecture series there; *A Further Range* is published (Pulitzer Prize 1937).

1938 Mrs. Frost dies in Gainesville, Florida, March 21; RF resigns professorship at Amherst College; sells home in Amherst, Massachusetts, and returns to South Shaftsbury, Vermont; subsequently rents apartment in Boston.

1939 Is appointed Ralph Waldo Emerson Fellow in Poetry at Harvard University; purchases Homer Noble Farm in Ripton, Vermont.

1940 Purchases property in South Miami, Florida.

1941 Is awarded Gold Medal by Poetry Society of America; purchases home in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

1942 *A Witness Tree* is published (Pulitzer Prize 1943).

1943 Terminates his Harvard University assignment; becomes George Ticknor Fellow in the Humanities at Dartmouth College.

1945 *A Masque of Reason* is published.

1947 *Steeple Bush* and *A Masque of Mercy* are published.

1949 *Complete Poems 1949* is published; accepts life appointment as Simpson Lecturer in Literature at Amherst College.

1953 Receives award from American Academy of Poets.

1954 *Aforesaid*, a limited edition of selected poetry, is published on RF's eightieth birthday; he is sent by U. S. Department of State as a delegate to the World Congress of Writers at São Paulo, Brazil.

1957 Goes to Britain and Ireland on "good will mission" for U. S. Department of State.

1958 Is named to term as Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress; receives awards from several sources, including

ROBERT FROST: SUPPLEMENTARY CHRONOLOGY

1894 "Dismal Swamp" episode

1896 Birth of son, Elliott

1899 Birth of daughter, Lesley

1900 Death of Elliott (aged 4); death of Frost's mother, Isabelle

1902 Birth of son, Carol

1903 Birth of daughter, Irma

1905 Birth of daughter, Marjorie

1907 Birth and Death of infant daughter, Elinor Bettina

1915 Elinor Frost's miscarriage

1925 Frost's sister, Jeanie, committed to mental hospital

1929 Death of Jeanie

1934 Death of daughter, Marjorie (aged 29)

1937 Frost's wife, Elinor, operated on for breast cancer ("I have had almost too much of her suffering in this world"--Letter to Untermeyer)

1938 Death of Elinor

1940 Death of Frost's son, Carol (suicide)

STORM FEAR

When the wind works against us in the dark,
And pelts with snow
The lower chamber window on the east,
And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,
The beast,
'Come out! Come out!'--
It costs no inward struggle not to go,
Ah, no!
I count our strength,
Two and a child,
Those of us not asleep subdued to mark
How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,--
How drifts are piled,
Dooryard and road ungraded,
Till even the comforting barn grows far away,
And my heart owns a doubt
Whether 'tis in us to arise with day
And save ourselves unaided.

circa 1900